

## [Honor Student]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK [6?] Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 CrotonaPark North

DATE November 25, 1938

SUBJECT HONOR STUDENT - STORY OF AN EAST SIDE GIRL

1. Date and time of Interview Nov. 22, 1938 afternoon
2. Place of Interview 1754 Bathgate Ave. Bronx, N. Y. C.
3. Name and address of informant

Informant asked me not to give identity. initials: Bessie W., 1754 Bathgate Ave.

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

Acquaintance

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

## Library of Congress

None

### 6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Interview took place in modest living room, clean, tastefully furnished with comfortable chairs, book case, cheap but unobtrusive prints, a studio couch that had apparently seen considerable wear but was wellkept, folding table and well-fitted rug.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Park North

DATE November 25, 1938

SUBJECT HONOR STUDENT- STORY OF AN EAST SIDE GIRL.

1. Ancestry Galician Jewish
2. Place and date of birth New York City, lower East Side About 1908
3. Family Husband, Three children
4. Places lived in, with dates East Side, Brooklyn, Bronx.
5. Education, with dates

## Library of Congress

Public School

### 6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Housewife; has been factory worker and typist

### 7. Special skills and interests

### 8. Community and religious activities

Little community activities, no religion

### 9. Description of informant

See attached sheet (#2, Form B)

### 10. Other Points gained in interview

Informant is a married woman of about 30, intelligent, high-strung, of Galician Jewish parentage. She is dark, with hair that once was lustrous and is still thick and well-cared for, but has become dull through excessive or incorrect bleachings. Large features, rather high cheekbones, handsome brown eyes and brow. Carries herself well, but is not entirely at ease, as evidenced by highpitched voice and occasional forced laughter. Very clean, neat housekeeper with appreciation of culture and music. Her personality contains a driving force that attempts to overcome educational and environmental limitations. Has other stories to tell, involving East Side locale and various factory-worker experiences. I have promised not to reveal source.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

## Library of Congress

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Park North

DATE November 25, 1938

SUBJECT HONOR STUDENT - STORY OF AN EAST SIDE GIRL

In those days my mother was walking around with a twenty-pound tumor; she was thin as a rail then, you'd never believe it, and looked like she was nine months pregnant. But she did her housework just like now and never complained. If I must say so, she always did her best for us children, though she was only an ignorant woman. What she went through - when there wasn't a nickel in the house and neighbors had to take pity on us - my father was always drunk and there would be terrible scenes. - its a wonder she lived through it at all. My mother, you know, isn't what you would call a dumb woman, only she doesn't talk. She was always that way. I can remember. Sometimes I think she knows more than you'd imagine. Six months she spent on Ellis Island, that's where she got that trouble with her eyes...

I grew up too fast; I didn't have much of a childhood. At eleven, I was almost as tall as now, well-built, and I was going around with fellers already. I remember I used to have all kinds of romatic ideas. How I used to suffer with Theda Bara in the movies! The way she lures a man; and always, always she has a baby - it used to tear my heart out so, I never enjoyed anything so much. We were living on 2 9th Street near Avenue A. Five of us in two small rooms; and once my aunt came to live with four of her six children - that's when she was suing her husband for support, Tevel Marshall, who I told you about,

## Library of Congress

the strongarm who was mixed up in the poultry racket; today he's a wreck, he has the "twitches"; they had to send him to Welfare Island... We all lived in the two rooms.

My mother never understood me, never advised me like a mother. With all his faults, my father was always closer to us children. He had lots of cronies; it was merry in the house whenever they came. I'll never forget one, Yerna, who used to sing, Herring mit pertaters, De besta markel for daym barkel (The best delight for your appetite) Iss herring mit pettaters!

and they used to make parodies on it about Czar Nicholas, Yerna was Russian, one of those refugees I think, everybody was; he hated the Czar like poison. But he was good - O was he good! He loved us children. He was thin, with a big nose, it was always red and the veins stood out from drinking. Some nights when my father didn't come home - we knew where he was, my mother would send Yerna to bring him home. Yerna was always jolly, always cracking jokes and singing beautiful songs, like "Aschnai iss gefallen" (The snow has fallen)... Also I remember he had terrible feet; big bunions that hurt so much he had to take his shoes off - and then! But he was a good person.

We had many roomers; relatives who stayed for a while, pressers in the shop where my father worked. . . I used to sleep in the same bed with my father and mother; I can't say anything against them, bit but it shows how ignorant people were in those days. The neighborhood was bad, too. Infested with prostitution, and tough gangs who liked to make life miserable for a girl. There were stores with curtains 3 in front; you knew what they were without asking. I once met a girl when I went to the showerbath on 11th Street, between A and B. Everybody on the East Side had to go to these public showerbaths. I remember there used to be two or three in a room and one shower. It was like a police station; the matrons were fresh as anything, they would shout "Come on out there!" if you were in a minute too long. I used to die of shame because these other girls and women saw me nude.

## Library of Congress

I was telling you about this girl. She was sorta sophisticated, and she looked me over in a funny way. I was embarrassed, but not she. When we were getting dressed she came over to me and said: "Would you like to come up to my home tonight?" But I didn't know how to make her out. She had an all-knowing look about her. That night when she called me from the window I told her I couldn't go out. For one week steady, can you believe it, she insisted that I go with her.

O, I was very unhappy then! I'll tell you something I never told anyone. I wanted to be an actress, and I used to stand in front of a mirror and practise suicide scenes with a knife. I was different from other girls; I didn't care about parties, I just wanted to get away from my home in the worst way. It was only in school that I was really happy. I loved to read and study, and I am sure I could have made something of myself; but then something happened that decided me to drop everything and just get a job. It was like a turning-point in my life.

Believe it or not, I was a very bright student. All the teachers respected me, and talked to me in a way different from the others. When it came graduation time, the Principal of the school picked me out to deliver the [recitation?]. I remember she was a fine-looking grayhaired lady with smooth pink skin. She was always very active and 4 strict with the teachers, but she was tolerant with children. She coached me about four weeks on the poem, which was more than ten stanzas long. It was to be a great occasion for me. On graduation day I was dressed all in white, my hair was in curls. I was really beautiful. I hadn't slept the night before, I was so excited. My father was supposed to get off from work to see me graduate. I was his favorite child, and he was proud of me.

After the organ playing and singing the national anthem we pledged allegiance and then the Principal read from the Bible, it was all thrilling. When it came my turn to recite I was in a terrible panic. I only know that I saw nothing, I heard nothing when I got up to say. They

## Library of Congress

do not reap who sow, Not to our eyes: Our sowers lie asleep; For them . . . release - For us, beneath serener, Future skies, (God willing,) A lo-ong peace. . .

It was about the dead, a beautiful poem, it was just after the armistice. But then, while I was reciting, my father - I heard a rumpus in the back of the auditorium, I saw him push a teacher aside and stumble in - he was dead drunk. Yes, it is funny, I can see now that it must have been funny. He was carrying a bouquet of flowers, and he was soused. He kept looking at me, and I know my voice was shaking, but I tried not to look at him. Every once in a while he would say out loud: "That's my daughter!" and they would try to shush him.

That is what made me determined not to continue school. I could never forgive my father for the way he humiliated me that day. I hated him for that, and I became hard as a stone to my family. Everything they wanted me to do, I did the opposite. I've changed again, of course, I can realize things better, but for years I was their enemy.